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UNCLAS DUSHANBE 001798

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN: FREEDOM HOUSE IN STRATEGIC RETREAT

1. (SBU) Primarily due to the ending of its DRL grant, Freedom House is shifting its Tajikistan efforts to a local NGO. Robert Freedman, Washington-based Program Director, told the Ambassador November 9 that Freedom House did not want its Tajik partners and human rights defenders to feel abandoned. In order to maintain a presence, and build on the NGO's successes, local staff had founded and registered a new NGO, Freedom, to work with the human rights community. Although DRL funding has expired, Freedman said potential donors, especially the Institute for Humane Studies, are interested in funding a Tajik think tank to allow journalists and scholars to look at domestic problems and find domestic solutions.

2. (SBU) Freedman observed that Tajikistan provided a great deal of "political space" in which human rights workers and others met freely and discuss sensitive issues without fear of arrest or repercussions from the government. "This would never happen in Uzbekistan," he emphasized. He gave the example of a Tajik student who participated in a Freedom House training program, and then published an op-ed piece about her positive experience. He did caution that freedom of expression might be constrained in the period leading to the November 2006 Presidential elections.

3. (SBU) COMMENT: For a director whose NGO has been specifically targeted by the Tajik government, Freedman was surprisingly positive about the human rights atmosphere in Tajikistan. However, as pleased as we are that things are not as bad as in Uzbekistan, the situation for NGOs in Tajikistan is far from good. We support the notion of establishing a think tank in Dushanbe, particularly one focused on economic or legal rights, which would fill a need for more focused intellectual debate. END COMMENT.

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